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AUTHOR O'Keefe, Patti; Johnston, Marilyn
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to develop scoring categories to assess differences in how teachers describe their communication patterns with students, focusing on teachers' understandings rather than on their behavior. Case study data was used to look at differences in teachers' responsiveness to students in their classrooms. Data came from three interviews, two structured and one open-ended, in which teachers discussed their teaching and their interactions with students. Findings indicated that reliable scoring categories related to the topic of interpersonal communication could be constructed from the data. The two case study teachers, who had very different scores on a cognitive-developmental measure, had contrasting understandings about students and described their interactions with them in ways that were consistent for each teacher across the three interviews. Details of the interviews held with teachers are presented along with extracts from the interviews. (CB)

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Differences in Teachers' Responsiveness to Students:

A Case Study

Paper presented at the
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Patti O'Keefe
Associate Clinical Instructor

Marilyn Johnston
Assistant Professor

Department of Educational Studies
University of Utah

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INTRODUCTION

Is there another profession with as much opportunity for interpersonal interaction as teaching? It would be difficult to argue against the notion that "in a day in the life of a teacher, no other activity is as pervasive as is human communication" (Hurt, et al, 1978, p. 6). The very nature of the enterprise allows us to describe teaching as essentially a form of human communication. And it may well be that the quality of this communication can contribute to the success of instruction (Bassett & Symthe, 1979). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to begin to describe differences in the way teachers perceive and understand their classroom interactions with students. More specifically, we used case study data to look at differences in teachers' responsiveness to students in their classrooms. By "responsiveness" we mean a teachers' ability to recognize, elaborate, and adapt to individual student perspectives in formulating communication strategies (Hunt, 1970, and Applegate, 1980).

Our assumption is that when communication occurs it is continuous, simultaneous, and reciprocal. When individuals interact each affects the other by responding to "cues". We constantly monitor one another, noting the characteristics of our listeners and reading their reactions as we attempt to communicate. Then we quickly make adaptations by modulating our verbal and non-verbal approaches accordingly. Consider the language adjustments one would typically, even intuitively, make in delivering directions to an adult and then to a very small child. The very pervasiveness of the adaptation process has allowed its importance to be generally overlooked, yet it is essential to effective communication.

Responsiveness, or "adaptability in interpersonal communication" (Hunt,

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1976) is an ubiquitous phenomenon occuring whenever communication takes place. Communication responses, at their most implicit level, are spontaneous and intuitive--almost automatic adjustments in language and behavior adapted to particular characteristics of, or perceived cues from, the listener. As an explicit component of effective communication, responsiveness requires taking account of another's frame of reference in order to modulate to a listener's perspective (Hunt, 1970).

Adaptation in the classroom is equally ubiquitous, and includes all those "moment-to-moment shifts in teacher behavior in response to an individual student, a group of students, or an entire class" (Hunt, 1976, p. 268). The initial impetus to investigate such classroom interaction patterns was provided by Philip Jackson's seminal work. In Life in Classrooms (1968), he reported that teachers' interpersonal interactions could differ markedly for individual students even within the same classroom. Brophy and Good further explored teacher-student interactions and concluded that differentiated communication patterns were influenced by particular traits or characteristics of students. In Teacher-Student Relationships: Causes and Consequences (1974), they introduced the notion of "student pull". They proposed that certain impression-loaded characteristics, such as a student's sex or behaviors could press or pull upon teachers and thus differentially influence their response patterns in the classroom. They suggested that many such patterns could not only be understood but predicted solely through knowledge about students and without complementary information about teachers. This claim is softened somewhat by their caution that to consider teachers "simply as teachers, without worrying too much about their individual differences" (Brophy and Good, 1974, p. 241) makes sense only to a point. While there are several factors which Brophy and Good felt enabled researchers to make general predictions about the

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responsiveness of teachers as a group, they did not deny the existence of meaningful variance among teachers in the ability to adapt to students. Their further investigations point to some dimensions of teacher differences in adaptability:

> Some teachers react more or less passively and predictably to whatever student behavior confronts them . . . . Other teachers find the time and methods needed to overcome the differential press presented to them. Still other[s] . . . not only react but over-react to student differences treating the students as even more different than they actually are. (Brophy and Good, 1974, p. ix)

This early research on student effects on teacher behavior was an important step toward redressing what had been perceived as a lopsided emphasis on the effects of teachers on students. Yet Brophy and Goods' acknowledgement of teacher variability notwithstanding, most of the subsequent studies of student pull treated teachers as interchangeable. Such studies typically describe general characteristics of students, e.g., verbal ability or sex, and report only general effects of these cues without considering differences among individual teachers.

The next important contribution to the study of teacher adaptability to students was made by David Hunt. Hunt believed that teacher adaptability to students was "the heart of the teaching-learning process" (Hunt, 1976, p. 268), and therefore, a critical component in any environment where people interact. His own studies included parents, Peace Corps Volunteers, and teachers under the general label Training Agents (Hunt, 1970). Hunt believed that this ability to adapt, while crucial to effective interpersonal communication, was poorly understood and largely ignored.

Hunt saw two limitations in the earlier research on the effects of student pull: 1) they did not specify precise cues given by the student, and 2) they tended to ignore possible variation among teachers. In a series of 10

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studies, Hunt attempted to correct these deficiencies. He proposed that, while adaptation in communication occurs continuosly, it would be easier to isolate and observe when the training agent encountered an obstacle to communication in a laboratory setting. He devised a behavioral task where a training agent under observation was provided student cues, as systematic obstacles. The subject, in a one-to-one or small group setting, was put in the role of a teacher and asked to teach a particular concept to a role-playing student. At specified intervals, the student would cue the teacher by failing to understand the communication. Teacher adaptation was assessed by the degree to which the subject's communication modulated in response to the obstacles. The results indicated that individual variation in response to these obstacles was enormous.

From his studies using this task, Hunt was able to produce a behaviorally-derived measure of adaptability in interpersonal communication called the Adaptability Index (Hunt, 1970). The measure (see Table 1) describes the degree to which subjects, when presented with systematic obstacles, take account of the listener's frame of reference and adapt their communication strategies accordingly.

In addition to describing differences among individuals, Hunt was interested in explaining them. He speculated that the differences reflected variation in subjects' Conceptual Levels (Harvey, Hunt & Schroder, 1961) that is, persons having more complex and abstract internal mapping structures with which to view others are better able to recognize and decenter to another person's perspective. To test this hypothesis, he looked for relationships between subjects' scores on the Adaptability Index and measures of conceptual level. A significant positive relation was found between the Adaptability Index and Attitude to Teaching Test (Hunt, Joyce & Weinstein, 1965). The ATT is considered a domain specific measure of conceptual level.

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The findings of 2 recent studies by James Applegate lend further support to Hunt's thesis. Using a theoretical framework similar to Hunt's Conceptual Systems, Applegate looked for differences in preservice teachers' communication strategies. He found a strong relationship between the level of abstractness of a teachers' construct system and the teachers' ability to recognize, elaborate and adapt to student perspectives (Applegate, 1980). Results of the second study revealed that subjects with "more complex and abstract constructs for perceiving others" generate and use more listener adaptive strategies in persuasive communication (Applegate, 1982, p. 287).

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

The purpose of this study was to construct scoring categories to assess differences in how teachers' describe their communication patterns with students, in particular, the degree to which they describe patterns that recognize, elaborate, and adapt to student perspectives. The methodology differs from Hunt and Applegate's work in that we were looking at teachers' understandings rather than their behavior. Our data came from structured interviews that asked teachers to talk about their teaching and their interactions with students. Rather than assess their behavioral response to students, we were interested in whether there were differences in teachers' perceptions and understandings of their classroom interactions. Like Hunt and Applegate, we theorized that differences in teachers' understandings would relate to differences in their cognitive levels. The part of the study described in this paper is the construction of the scoring categories built from case studies of two teachers with scores at very different cognitive-developmental levels.

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METHODOLOGY

Subjects

To construct the scoring categories we used extensive interview material from two teachers who had very different scores on a cognitive-developmental measure, the Defining Issues Test (D.I.T.). The D.I.T. is a measure of moral cognitive-development and has been shown in other studies to be positively related to differences in teachers' understandings about teaching (Erickson, 1975; Witherell, 1978; Lubomudrov, 1982; Johnston, 1985). Both case study teachers are elementary school teachers, and, at the time of the interviews, were enrolled in an two-year cohort MEd Program at the University of Utah. The first teacher, teacher A, was teaching 2nd grade at the time of the interviews and had taught for 6 years. The second teacher, teacher B, was teaching 3rd grade and also had been teaching for 6 years. Both teachers were considered to be good teachers, and had good academic records in their undergraduate work (3.44 and 3.11 respectively). Teacher A was 37 years old; Teacher B was 29. The D.I.T. score for Teacher A was 9; the D.I.T. score for Teacher B was 34. We chose teachers with widely spread scores to determine whether differences in cognitive-developmental scores might be positively related to their perceptions and understandings of interpersonal communication.

Interviews

The data used to construct the scoring categories were 3 interviews, two structured and one open-ended, given over a 6 month period. The first

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structured interview asked the teachers to describe how they organized their classroom and to discuss topics related to teaching, e.g., curriculum, instructional strategies, management, basic skills, grading, interpersonal interactions with students. The interview questions were set ahead of time, but teachers' responses were probed to extend responses and clarify meanings. The second structured interview covered topics related to classroom management--how classroom rules were established, who held responsibility for enforcing the rules, how infractions were handled, and how classroom problems were solved. The third interview was a stimulated recall interview using a one-hour video of the teachers' classroom. The teacher was asked to describe what was happening on the video and to explain her reasons for instructional and management choices. For each teacher, we had a cumulative total of about 5 to 6 hours of interview data.

Identification of the Scoring Categories

Hunt identified 2 general components of the adaptation process: 1) the teacher must "read" the cues presented by the learner, and 2) the teacher then must "flex" the communication approach in order to modulate to the learner's perspective (Hunt, 1976, p. 271). We used these two broad categories to construct our scoring categories. To begin, we identified all of the passages in the teachers' first interview that referred to classroom interaction. We found we could classify these interview segments into the "reading" or "flexing" categories. We also found we could identify further distinctions within each of the categories.

Using these scoring categories and sub-categories, the interview segments not used in constructing the categories (the second and third interviews) were blind scored to the categories by both researchers and the scores compared.

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Interrater agreement prior to negotiation was .94. The discussion of scoring differences led to some changes in the descriptions of the scoring categories. The interview segments were then blind scored by a third researcher and the scores compared to the negotiated scores. Again, minor changes were made to increase the clarity of the category descriptions.

FINDINGS

There are two general findings. First, we found we could construct reliable scoring categories related to the topic of interpersonal communication (see Table 2). Second, we found that our two case study teachers, who had very different scores on a cognitive-developmental measure, had constrasting understandings about students and described their interactions with them in ways that were consistent for each teacher across the three interviews. The next step is to use the scoring categories to code interviews from other teachers and then to see if there is a relationship between high and low scores on the categories and high and low scores on the D.I.T.

INTERVIEW EXTRACTS

This section provides examples from the interviews for two of the four categories to demonstrate the differences between high and low responses. Teacher A's interview responses consistently reflected understandings that were scored low; Teacher B's interview responses represented understandings that were predominantly scored high.

The first category, individuating, describes differences in teachers' ability to separate individuals from the group. Teacher A typically described

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her classroom in an undifferentiated way. She perceived children as belonging to a classroom group that was homogeneous. For example, groups rather than individuals had interests:

> I always like to build the curriculum on their interests more than on my own. I kind of listen to the way the class talks and what they're interested in. If they're all interested in transportation or cars or trains then I pick that vibe up and just go with what they are interested in.
>
> What if some of them are interested and some of them are not?
>
> The majority, I guess, like in this democratic society, the majority rules. If they don't like it they learn to.

Even though Teacher A speaks of attending to children's interests, she only describes interests that might belong to the group. She talks about adapting to children's interests, but as the interview progresses, she explains how students are expected to conform to a prescribed curriculum.

> Suppose they don't want to learn it. They want to learn something else. We'll have another day for that. We are studying maps and community helpers. They didn't pick it out. I did because that's what 2nd graders are supposed to learn.

A uniform curriculum treats students as a group and, therefore, excludes individual interests.

Teacher B, by contrast, is able to perceive the students in her classroom as having separate interests and abilities. She talks about the classroom as a group, but in a way that acknowledges its heterogeneous nature.

> Well, the kids for whom it [classroom meetings] doesn't work have a lot more social problems. The kids for whom it does work seem to be able to work together better, they have better social skills, they communicate better and they compromise easier.

The way these teachers set up seating arrangements also shows differences in their perceptions of students. Teacher B assigns seats based on the characteristics of individual students.

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Do you make out a seating chart at the beginning of the year?

No. It's random. You get to know your kids. You know who's going to get along with who. Who's going to get along too well. Who's not going to get along. You try and avoid conflicts. At least I do.

Teacher A's description of her seating arrangement indicates a different perspective. When a new boy enters the room, he sits in the back by himself because everyone is seated in pairs and he is the odd person.

Why did you put the new boy by himself in the back of the room?

It just happens we don't have enough space in the room to put him in the rest of the group. We have them in pairs in even numbers. He came and he was an odd number.

It appears that a prearranged group seating order takes precedence over what might be the need of a new child in the room.

A further difference between these teachers' understandings within the individuating category appeared when they described their approaches to individualizing. Teacher A's discussion reflects her preoccupation with maintaining a homogeneous group.

I think individualizing is a personal thing. It depends on the child's level. If he's on grade level he doesn't need it. Individualizing I think is mainly for those who are below their level and who need to be brought up to the level--the grade.

Her understanding of individualizing seems to be linked to her dominant concern with maintaining uniform standards for the group. Individualization is only necessary to bring students to grade level and not desireable in and of itself. Moreover, students who require individual attention are considered behavior problems rather than individuals with special needs.

The way I can tell they need individualizing is by the little questions they ask that were explained say in the major discussion with the whole class. . . . I can pick out several children. A half a dozen children will come up even after I've told them what to do. They'll come up and ask again . . . to me individualizing is more giving attention to the child who knows what I expect and knows what I want.

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Teacher A holds uniform standards to which children are expected to comply and is irritated with what she believes is unnecessary individual interaction.

> I get tired, like one little girl who is always coming up and insisting on taking up my time, more than any child who wants individualization. This kind of thing kind of bugs me, yet I try not to show it.

Teacher B, on the other hand, values individualization and is uncomfortable with her limited capacity to provide for individual differences.

> How far do you individualize?
>
> Not far. Not far enough at least for my own conscience. But as far as I find it to be practical for the amount of time I'm given with the children and the amount of children I have. If a child is particularly interested in a subject area, and they have the abilities to go ahead and research that, they are certainly welcome to do so if they have the motivation to do so.

She acknowledges that students may well have individual interests and is willing to support their pursuit of such interests even though time and student numbers limit what she can do.

Teacher A thought individualizing was necessary primarily to bring students up to the level of the group. Teacher B held few group expectations. For her, the ideal was a curriculum adapted to students rather than students conforming to prescribed curriculum.

> I think we need to individualize standards. It's impossible of course...
>
> Suppose you were allowed to do what you want, what would you do?
>
> I would take a group of children for three or four years and I would have 4 or 5 teachers working with these children, and I would individualize their program so that certain goals were set for each term based on where they were then, not where the group is supposed to be.

The category of individuating represents a teachers' ability to view students as unique and separate from a group. Teacher A's predominant concern throughout the interviews was to promote group conformity and to discourage individual

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students from asserting their own interests and needs. She would prefer that all individual variation be absorbed into a uniform group.

> You said you'd like to change the way you approach discipline? Why?
>
> To get a better result or have things move spontaneously more so that all the children will move spontaneously from one subject to the next. It's not just a few, the few who finish first. Everybody.
>
> You'd like them to move more as a group?
>
> Yes. I think so. There's a place on the report card where we mark for behavior and attitudes. It asks if the child has energy, spontaneity and enthusiasm. I figure that's not just energy that he's up out of his chair all the time, that he can finish his work and enjoy what he's doing, move with the group and move quickly with the group. However, not everybody can do that. They're learning. I'm sure they're going to have to learn this in school because other classrooms will demand it.

In contrast, Teacher B understands that individuals differ in a way that necessitates a differentiated approach.

> We've got an attitude that everyone is to be treated equally, the same, and I don't see everyone the same. I don't think it's possible to treat everyone the same. I don't treat my own friends in the same way. . . . We have the idea in this country that we are supposed to treat all kids equally.
>
> Equally means the same?
>
> The same, and I can't do that.

Further, Teacher A is able to perceive the conflict between maintaining individuality and promoting conformity to group standards.

> I don't think it's my job to change a child's personality. Some children just really have a hard time conforming. Although we have to conform in this school, I don't think it's my job to change the personality. . . . It would make my job easier but I don't know if it would be to the child's benefit. Some children are just non-conformers. I respect that. I can't let that interfere with the rights of the group to learn but I respect their right not to conform to my standards for their whole life or even for the whole school year.

Teacher B recognizes that students are unique in various ways, and while respecting them as individuals, realizes that attention to their separate needs must be balanced with the needs of the group.

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Table 1
Adaptability Index

Rating	Behavioral Referent
1	Completely insensitive
2	Aware of obstacle, but does not modulate
3	Aware of obstacles and makes some attempt to modulate
4	Shifts and modulates presentation in flexible fashion
5	Modulates and explores for more information from listener's frame of reference

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TABLE 2
Scoring Categories

"READING"

INDIVIDUATING - separating individuals from a group. Relies on teacher's ability to view individual students as unique and separate from the classroom group.

TEACHER A (low)	TEACHER B (high)
teacher describes class as collective group; individuals must conform to group norms	teacher describes class as collection of unique individuals; individuals need not conform to group norms

DIFFERENTIATING - noting cues and assigning characteristics. Relies on teacher's ability to recognize student cues and identify and elaborate student perspective.

teacher is insensitive to or avoids student cues; notices the external child; describes characteristics as behavioral or stereotypical	teacher is sensitive and open to student cues; notices the internal child; describes psychological characteristics

"FLEXING"

MODULATING - responding to student pull. Relies on teachers' willingness to translate student cues into specific teacher behaviors.

teacher avoids responding or demonstrates limited capacity to respond; expects student to adapt to teacher's perspective	teacher evidences a variety of flexible responses; modulates to student perspective; expects mutuality of adaptation

MONITORING - checking adequacy of responses. Relies on teachers' willingness to check effects of modulations and alter behavior in response to feedback.

teacher evidences lack of awareness of feedback (re-cuing); engages in static, inflexible, repetitive re-modulations	teacher seeks continuous feedback; engages in flexible re-modulations

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